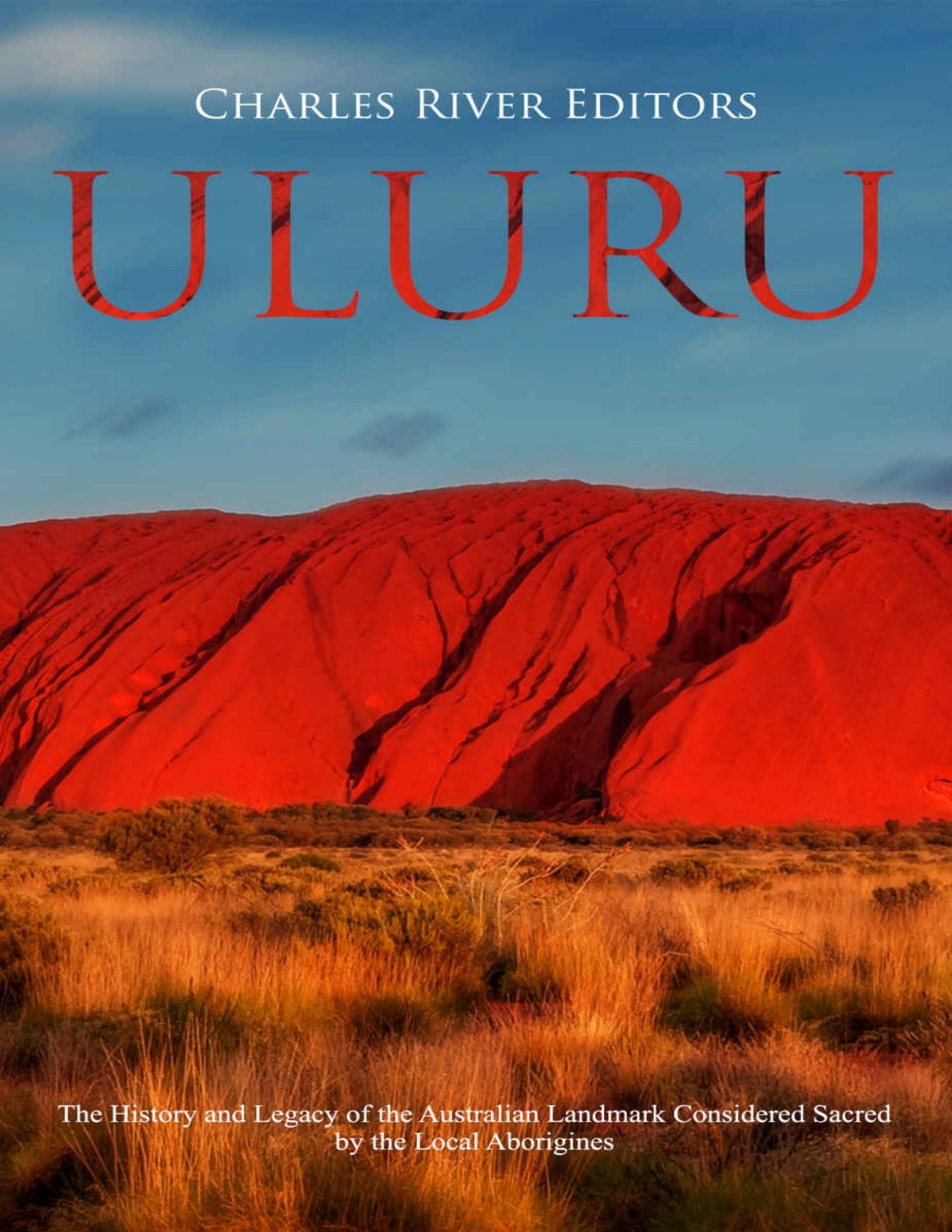
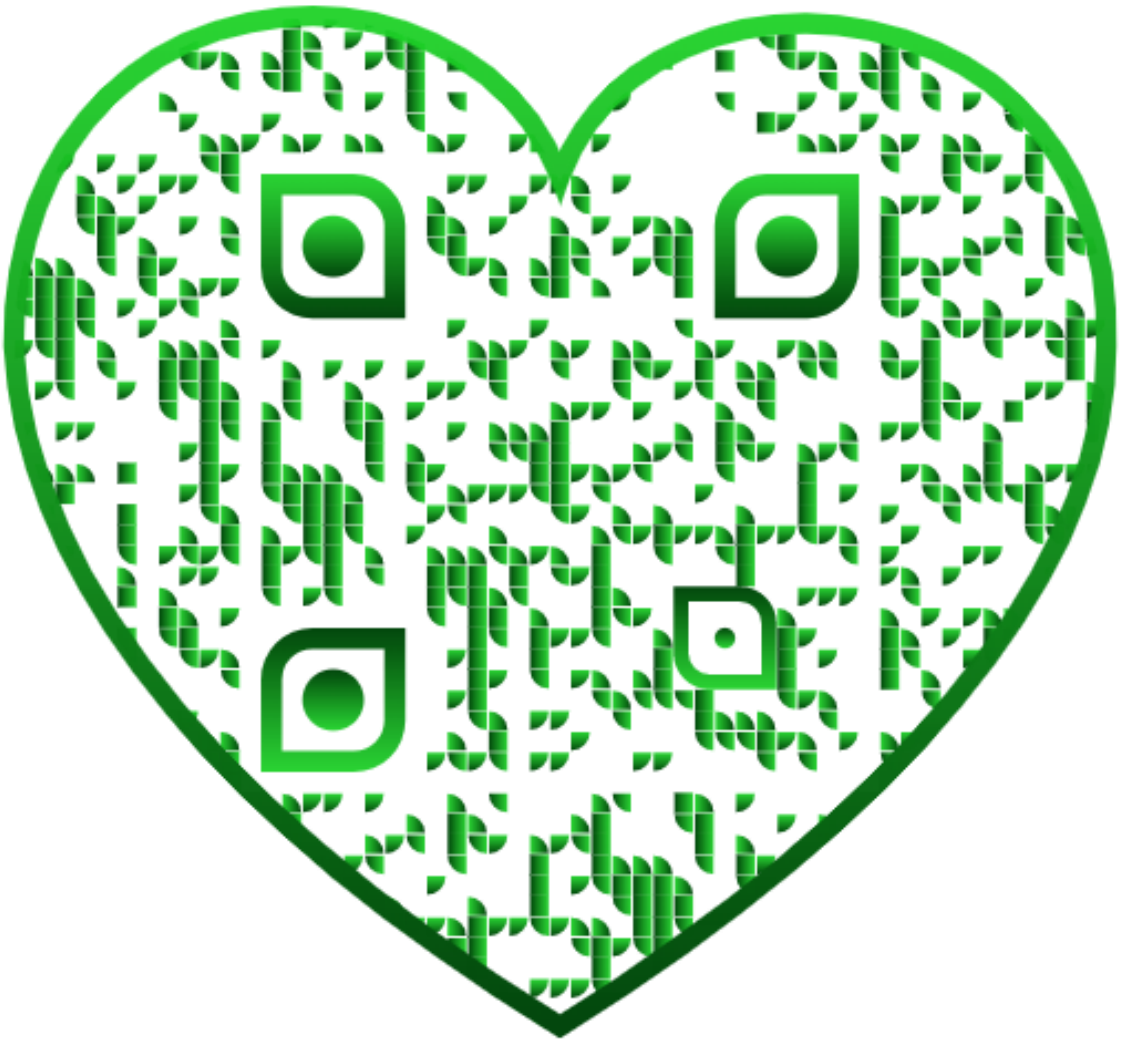

CHARLES RIVER EDITORS
ULURU
The History and Legacy of the Australian Landmark Considered Sacred by the Local Aborigines



Uluru: The History and Legacy of the Australian Landmark Considered Sacred by the Local Aborigines

By Charles River Editors

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Introduction

Stuart Edwards' picture of Uluru

The magnificent monolith the locals call "Uluru," situated in the heart of Australia, hovers over a patchy bed of desert poplars and spinifex grasslands. The pleasant, but otherwise unexceptional surroundings of the spellbinding sandstone landform only further accentuates its majesty, one that can be appreciated from a variety of angles. To lime-colored budgerigars, mighty brown falcons, passengers in planes and helicopters, and other creatures blessed with the gift of flight, the free-form rock is reminiscent of the fossil of a spiky fish, a misshapen arrowhead, or perhaps a peculiar, ocher-tinged seashell peeking out of the sand. To those gazing upon the natural gem on solid ground, the flat-topped, burnt sienna beauty, marked with character-forming dimples, ripples, and ridges, looks more like a sleeping, thousand-year-old turtle, particularly through squinted eyes.

Its striking appearance aside, Uluru, also known as "Ayers Rock," is far more than an unmissable landmark. Uluru represents an inimitable symbol of life and culture, and a place of worship sacred to the region's aboriginal inhabitants. Given the long and riveting history attached to this hallowed rock, the aura of mysticality and mystery that clings to Uluru should come as no surprise. Not only does the rock's flaky surface change color throughout the day – going from a deep violet with hints of gray to a light lilac, to a fiery orange-red during sunrise, and from its usual apricot-gold to a faded orange, to a dreamy purplish-pink at dusk – Uluru, they say, is an endless source of inexplicable happenings and paranormal occurrences.

Although the natives have spared no effort in underscoring the rock's spiritual and cultural significance to the Aborigines, their pleas for visitors to

respect the rock have been repeatedly ignored. Indeed, the lack of courtesy displayed towards Uluru has heightened in recent years, and the land's inhabitants have been forced to navigate the so-called age of the “social media influencer.” Thousands of tourists swarm the rock every year, sticking their head through aboriginal spy holes and modeling pretentious yoga poses with captions to match. Perhaps most notoriously, a 25-year-old French-born exotic dancer named Alizee Sery angered netizens around the globe in 2010 when she hiked up to the top of Uluru and stripped down to nothing but an Akubra cattleman hat, bikini bottoms, and white go-go boots. Sery spoke to various news outlets shortly thereafter and defended the strip tease, filmed for a documentary, which she claimed was meant as an homage to the indigenous peoples. According to Sery’s partially paternalistic explanation, “'My project is a tribute to the greatness of the rock. What we need to remember is that traditionally, the Aboriginal people were living naked. So stripping down was a return to what it was like.” Aboriginal elders, on the other hand, branded the attention-seeking stunt “stupid” and compared it to relieving oneself on the Vatican steps. As Kon Vatskalis, Minister of the Northern Territory Government, put it, “How would...French people feel if an Australian danced semi-naked on the altar of the Notre Dame?”

Uluru: The History and Legacy of the Australian Landmark Considered Sacred by the Local Aborigines examines the geological origins of the famous rock, its most interesting characteristics, and its history. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Uluru like never before.

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The Rise of the Rock

An aerial picture of Uluru

“We are visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love...and then we return home.” – Anangu proverb

As the setting sun slowly sinks behind Uluru, the glorious orb casts a shadow over the beautifully misshapen rock and crowns it with a golden halo. Uluru’s rustic elegance is a force to be reckoned with in the daytime, and its formidable presence only doubles when it dons a cloak of hazy dark purple in the evenings, set against a breathtakingly surreal canvas dotted with countless twinkling stars. Even without context, the magnetism is almost palpable.

With context, the multi-layered brilliance of the imposing rock grows twofold. Uluru, alternatively known as “Ayers Rock,” is one of Australia's most underrated treasures. The mesmerizing rock is steeped in history, a

timeless beacon of aboriginal culture, and some consider it as disquieting as it is inviting.

Although Uluru is often referred to as a monolith, it is, more specifically, an inselberg or, more plainly put, an island mountain. This entrancing inselberg towers over its surrounding desert land at a height of 1,142 feet (348 meters), with a girth of approximately six miles (9,400 meters) wide. Interestingly enough, not unlike the Easter Island heads, much of Uluru's torso, about 1.6 miles lengthwise, is buried underground. The rock's isolation further heightens its mystique. The nearest town, Alice Springs, lies about 291 miles northeast of Uluru, equivalent to a nearly 6 hour drive.

Uluru is not the biggest of its kind - the title belongs to Mount Augustus, or *Burringurrah*, in the Wadjari territory in Western Australia, which is two-and-a-half times its size – but in this case size does not matter, for Uluru is a spectacular and formidable marvel in its own right. Indeed, how this remarkable rock came to be remains a matter of speculation among scientists, most of whom advocate one of three popular theories.

A picture taken from the top of Uluru

Mark Andrews' picture of different rock formations on Uluru

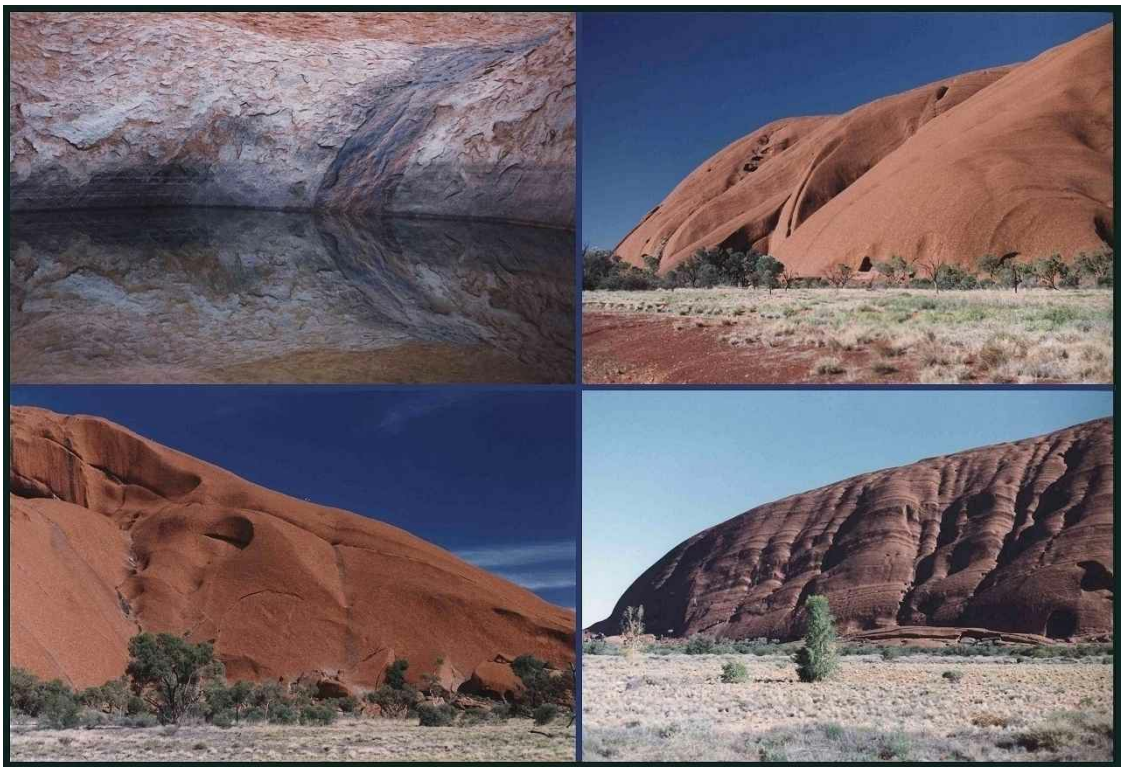
In the first theory, Uluru is believed to be roughly 500 million years old, which correlates with the geological formation of Australia's eastern states. Enormous crustal blocks, some stretching on for hundreds of miles, slammed into one another repeatedly, which created chains of colossal, irregularly shaped mountains. The Uluru, as well as the neighboring collection of clay-colored, domed rocks called the "Kata Tjuta," were among the multiple projections that arose from the surface during the emergence of the Petermann Range. Proponents of this theory think the ranges in question were comparable in stature to those of the Himalayas or the Karakoram, but due to the stark lack of flora in these parts, these projections were unable to withstand erosion and steadily crumbled in the hundreds of millions of years that followed. The Petermann Range was no exception, as the hands of time chipped away at the soft exterior of the Uluru until all that remained was its core, giving the rock its present form.

The geological process of deposition plays a fundamental role in the second theory, which is in a way an offshoot of the first. According to the theory's

proponents, sometime between 550-600 million years ago, swirling sediment originating from the Musgrave Ranges slowly traveled about 63 miles upstream and eventually pooled in a deep depression in the earth. *Creation* contributor Andrew Snelling described the phases that followed: “[A]bout 350 million radiometric years ago, the sandy material, by that time hardened to form sandstone, is thought to have been pushed up and tilted by earth movements. Over the next 250 million years, slow erosion processes carved out the present shape of [Uluru], a shape which...has been little changed over the past 100 million years.”

The aforementioned theories appear to be perfectly valid on paper, so to speak, but subscribers of the final theory have stumbled across one glaring error in their logic. Uluru is mainly composed of arkose, a coarse, grainy sandstone that is a quarter feldspar. This is the lustrous mineral that gives the rock its rusty coral hue and its mood-ring-like abilities. Arkose particles are random in size, so the final product itself is a fusion of grains big and small, or “unsorted,” all solidified into a single layer.

The notable presence of feldspar in the rock renders the idea of a gradual evolutionary process impossible, because feldspar is known for its inability to combat elemental exposure, be it the blistering sun, blustering winds, or torrential downpours. When exposed to such elements, the rock-forming mineral rapidly breaks down and takes the shape of clay. As such, the feldspar-rich Uluru could not have taken hundreds of millions of years to arise, for it would have been unable to survive the destructive storms and debilitating tropical weathering that ravaged the area during that time.



Pictures of rain and water flowing through Uluru’s channels

Instead, supporters of the final theory claim that an earth-shaking, cataclysmic flood carried a powerful maelstrom of sediment from the Musgrave Ranges and poured it into the depression where the Uluru and Kata Tjuta now stand. This theory also suggests that Uluru is far younger than it is often purported to be. Snelling explained, “This traumatic flood...had to be a recent event, otherwise the feldspar...grains in the sandstone would not appear as fresh and...unweathered as they are today...Following the retreat of these floodwaters, and as the landscape dried out, the material...hardened. The chemicals in the water between the sand grains formed a cementing material to bind the mineral grains together...With the final retreat of the waters from off the land and the continued drying out of the continent, present day desert wind erosion has merely pock-marked the surface of the rock.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the birth of Uluru as told by the local aboriginal tribes that have dwelt on the soil of the Northern Territory's “Red Center” for tens of thousands of years is a vastly different and far more captivating tale. More than 40 aboriginal tribes share a deep-rooted spiritual and personal

relationship with the hallowed rock, with the aboriginal Anangu tribes being the most prominent.

Like the sacred inselberg, the origins of the Anangu remain a matter of dispute. A 1987 archaeological excavation conducted in Cleland Hills, about a 322-mile drive north of Uluru, indicated that the ancestors of the Anangu first migrated to the area about 22,000 years ago. Another dig in Central Australia's MacDonnell Ranges, rolled out by a separate crew of archaeologists seven years later, implied that the Anangu were part of the first aboriginal settlers that made their homes on the fringes of the continent about 30,000-40,000 years ago, during the early years of the Upper Paleolithic period. In another account, the Anangu predates even these settlers by another 10,000-20,000 years.

The original definition of “Anangu” was “human being,” but following the arrival of the white colonists, it was modified to mean “we, the Aborigines.” The Anangu were typical nomadic hunter-gatherers who venerated pagan gods, honored cultural traditions, and worshiped their land. The Anangu tribes spoke up to six different languages, presumably with their own dialects, but conversed mostly in the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunjatjara tongues. The name “Uluru” is an aboriginal denomination that means “sacred seat of the ancestors.” In other accounts, the name is said to be inspired by a common surname, perhaps of an influential chief.

The Anangu tribes were supremely self-sufficient, for the land adjacent to Uluru provided them with all the means of survival, most notably food, water, medicine, and shelter. They were among the first to practice a zero waste principle, making certain to utilize almost every part of the animals and plants at their disposal.

To the Anangu, the *wanari*, a small mulga tree native to the Australian outbacks, was one of the most versatile plants on the land. The tough timber, to begin with, was used to kindle the fire they needed for warmth and for smoking meat. Its main branches and parts of the trunk were also used in the production of *mukulpa* (arrow and fishing barbs), *miru* (a type of spear), and *wana* (a stick used for digging). The thinner branches of the *wanari* were used in the construction of *wiltja*, the tribes' above-ground shelters, as well as *yuu*, woven screens fashioned out of leaves, twigs, and branches that served

as fences and wind-guards.

The tree also functioned as a food source. The small, golf ball-like mulga apples, known to the Anangu as *tarulka*, that sprouted from the end of the *wanari's* branches were either eaten raw or cooked in the earth. The wasp larvae filling inside the plant-animal hybrid was also consumed and is said to have a honeyed taste, not unlike apples, hence its name. Finely ground mulga seeds, or *wintalyka*, were added to water and stirred until thickened to create a kind of food pulp called *latja*, as well as *nyuma*, or seed cakes. *Tarulka*, *latja*, and *nyuma*, as well as *ili* (a type of fig), *kampurarpa* (bush raisins), and *tjanmata* (bush onions) were classed as *mai*, meaning "food derived from plants."

Considering the topography and natural resources available in the "semi-arid desert" environment of the Uluru, the Anangu did not dine on beef, mutton, chicken, or what would be considered traditional meats. The tribesmen experimented instead with the local sources of protein and compiled a list of edible animals, otherwise known as *kuka*. Kangaroos, *kipara* (bush turkeys), woma pythons, emus, *tinka* (sand goannas), and the eggs of critters were often on the menu. The Anangu also snacked on *tjala* (honey ants) and various larvae, and they often picked at the small globs of nectar that lined tree branches for dessert.

The Anangu relied on numerous tools of their own design to facilitate their survival in the wild. The concoction of healing pastes and medicinal powers required the use of instruments similar to a mortar and pestle. The Anangu called them the *tjiwa* (a flat slab of rock) and the *tjungari* (a grindstone), and these were also used to grind seeds, fruit, and other food products. The sharp end of the *wana* was used to scrape larvae off twigs and for digging out burrowing animals and roots. Men young and old were well-versed in the *kali*, which were semi boomerang-shaped gadgets that were lobbed at unsuspecting prey, albeit without the recoil. This multi-functional tool could also be spotted at religious ceremonies, where they served as musical instruments. The *kulata*, a type of spear, as well as the *tjutinypa*, a long and narrow, somewhat phallic club with a hard, rounded quartz edge like a matchstick, were also used for hunting.

The different societal roles assigned to Anangu men and women, according

to aboriginal lore, were determined during the rock's creation period. Also referred to as “men's and women's business,” the appointment of the roles was and continues to be a crucial component of Anangu law.

Girls were expected to shadow their mothers, older sisters, aunties, and grandmothers from a young age so as to acquire the knowledge delegated to the female members of the tribes, most importantly the gathering and preparation of bush food, and tips on how to more efficiently use cooking utensils and medicine-making apparatuses. Anangu women were the cooks and physicians of their tribes, and they were therefore obligated to study seasonal patterns, the medicinal uses of plants and bush foods, and the habitats and routines of insects and small critters.

Young boys, on the other hand, who customarily resided with the females of their immediate family, were not required to tag along on these all-female excursions. Unlike their female counterparts, boys would not be inducted into the “men's business” until their early teenage years. Once they were deemed old and trustworthy enough to learn the tricks of the trade, they were made to complete a different kind of hands-on curriculum, one that involved secret rituals and songs revealed only to Anangu men, as well as directions to sacred spaces and structures, such as the Uluru. Boys were also taught an exhaustive set of survival skills, including how to stalk and hunt prey, the locations of potable water and hunting hotspots, building fires, crafting and using combat weapons and hunting tools.

As maintained by the Anangu tribesmen, the mighty rock was born during the days of Creation, otherwise known as *Tjukurpa* or *Alcheringa*, or in English, “Dreamtime.” Initially, the world was once no more than a blank, colorless slate of nothing, but this all changed with the arrival of the 10 *Tjukuritja*, or spirit gods. The *Tjukuritja*, the original ancestors of the Anangu people, were powerful, supernatural beings with shape-shifting abilities, often taking the form of humans and animals. The *Tjukuritja* journeyed across the unexplored terrain, raising tribes, hunting for nourishment, and waging wars against the other spirit gods, unintentionally engineering the molds of mountains, oceans, and rivers, and splitting continents in the process. The fated paths they took as they circled the globe are called *iwara*, or in English, “dreaming tracks” or “song lines.” The *iwara* are the sacred links that bind

together all the holy centers of the Anangu. Tradition calls for all Anangu men to make regular pilgrimages across the land of the Uluru and Kata Tjuta, of which there are over 40 hidden sacred sites, using these *iwara* paths.

When *Tjukurpa* came to a close, the raw, clay-like structures and channel bottoms left behind by the forces of the gods' love and destruction solidified into actual landforms. The physical bodies of the *Tjukuritja* eventually disintegrated and transformed into crystal-blue lakes, enchanting caves, charming hills, and other natural features. Uluru, they say, consists of a mix of the earthly bodies shed by multiple spirit gods. *Uluru Australia*, a web magazine dedicated to this ethereal rock, sums up its spiritual significance succinctly: “[Uluru] represents the physical evidence of [the *Tjukuritja's*] time on...earth, and is seen as one of their most dramatic and inspiring creations.” The Anangu believed that one could communicate with the *Tjukuritja* by simply placing one's palm against the rock, and those who touched the rock were also gifted with blessings of good health and spiritual prosperity.

The Anangu way of life was encapsulated in *Tjukurpa* teachings. *Tjukurpa* shaped the laws and philosophy of the tribes, and contained instructions and guidelines regarding societal roles, social relationships, the veneration of sacred sites, and the proper conduct that must be demonstrated towards all living things. With the absence of written records, the Anangu relied on purely oral traditions to navigate morality and other tests of life. This further accentuates the importance of their religious ceremonies and pilgrimages; during the latter, men recited the rambling lore they inherited through so-called “song cycles,” which ran on for days on end. *Tjukurpa* tales also doubled as directions to the coordinates of sacred sites, drinkable water sources, and popular hunting grounds. The Anangu’s young, as dictated by the laws laid down by the *Tjukurpa*, were vested with the responsibility of upholding their precious legacy and serving as the guardians and preservers of all natural features and environments, which were essentially parts of the spirit gods themselves.

Myths and hymns aside, *Tjukurpa* stories were also told through the ageless medium of art, mainly rock paintings. Visitors today can still spot these faded, but well-maintained illustrations and petroglyphs in the caves of the

Uluru, which consist of strange, shapeless craters embedded on the sides of the rock. One of them is the *Kulpi Nyiinkaku* (literally “the teaching cave”), as well as cliff sides, and in between select cracks and fissures. Charcoal, white ash, and earthy pigments such as yellow and red ocher, along with other minerals, brought a vibrant splash of color to these ancient paintings.

A picture of petroglyphs on Uluru

Many local myths centered on Uluru attempted to explain the distribution and behavior of the land's flora and fauna. As Erin O'Neill of Colorado College's *Indigenous Religious Traditions* blog so poetically put it, “The rock's surface breathes with fables of their past, each dimple and crease in the terrain the subject of a unique and renovated tale.” The first of these fascinating fables tells the story of the Mala tribe, christened after the Rufous Hare-wallaby, the smallest of all the rodent-like marsupials with long snouts and elongated, round ears. Legend has it that the first Mala people, who originally hailed from the north, chanced upon the rock during their search for a new home. The nomadic tribe, bewitched by Uluru at once, decided to

set up camp on the rock.

At that time, the Mala tribesmen began to make preparations for *inma*, a term meaning “religious ceremony,” to inaugurate their new camping ground. Mala women wandered off into the wild and returned with baskets brimming with bush fruits and vegetables. Others grinded sweet seeds with the help of a *tjungari* and *tjiwa*, and whipped up several batches of *nyuma*, which were kept cool in the rock's caves. Mala men sparked crackling bonfires, gathered musical instruments, sharpened their weapons, and ornamented the ceremonial pole, the *ngaltawata*, with flowers and other foliage.

The Mala people were so preoccupied with the prep work that they failed to notice the approaching pair of strangers. Once the men made their presence known, they introduced themselves as members of the neighboring Wintalka tribe, natives of the Petermann ranges to the west, and invited the newcomers to their *inma*. To these envoys’ dismay, the Mala tribesmen politely declined their offer, opting to resume their own *inma* instead, which could not be stopped once it had begun.

The pair returned to Wintalka ground and relayed the exchange. Their fellow tribesmen took great offense to the rejection of what they believed was a most coveted invitation, and they subsequently sought immediate vengeance. In other accounts, the Wintalka gentlemen were insulted by the Mala people's refusal to trade the eagle feathers they desperately needed for the continuation of their *inma*.

Whatever the case, the fuming elders conjured up a winged demon-dog spirit by the name of Kurpany and ordered the vicious creature – a *mamu,* or “evil ghost” – to ruin the Mala ceremony. The cunning Kurpany adopted numerous disguises to throw the unsuspecting Mala people off its scent, but unbeknownst to the vengeance seekers, a kingfisher goddess named Luunpa recognized Kurpany and learned of the Wintalka's plans. She hastened over to the Mala and urged them to vacate the premises. Sadly, her pleas fell on deaf ears. Kurpany arrived shortly thereafter and, as instructed, laid waste to the Mala camp site, slaughtered several of the tribesmen, and chased many of the Mala people to eastern and southern Australia. Some locals still claim visitors can make out the imprints of Kurpany's hooves, seemingly headed east and south, by the base of Uluru.

The remorseful Luunpa never fully recovered from the harrowing incident. She returned to Uluru time and time again, until she eventually metamorphosed into a large boulder, where she guards the rock to this very day. Likewise, the spirits of the slaughtered men continue to haunt the caves near the top of Uluru, now collectively referred to as “the Skull.” The large column-like protrusion on the northeast side of the rock, known to the locals as the “Kangaroo Tail,” is said to be the *ngaltawata* that Kurpany swiped from the Mala camp. Crude depictions of Kurpany and the Mala tribesmen can also be found on the walls of the Skull's caves.

Most of the caves on the eastern half of the Skull, which were traditionally inhabited by Mala “chosen” men (the fathers, uncles, and older male cousins of initiates) continued to hold great spiritual and cultural significance for the following generations of the Rufous Hare-wallaby tribe. The remaining caves on the east were occupied by male elders and seniors past their prime who no longer participated in the *inma*. The clusters of flat rocks on the opposite side of the Uluru were reserved for Mala women. The modern-day Mala still spend nights at the same campsites during times of *inma*.

The story of Kuniya and Lira, set in Uluru's Mutitjulu Waterhole, is another oft-repeated Anangu creation myth. The tale begins with Kuniya, a sand serpent goddess named after the striped woma pythons found in these parts, who traveled to Uluru with the purpose of hatching her eggs in the once-secret freshwater spring. The journey was as arduous as it was winding. When darkness began to unfold, Kuniya stopped at the Kuniya Piti by the eastern tip of Uluru and dropped off her eggs, threaded together around her neck on a thick strand of rope, before heading over to Taputji to rest her head.

Kuniya camped out at the Piti for several days, foraging for food and stalking prey in the nearby sand hills, but the soothing solitude was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of an out-of-breath fellow tribesman, bearing with him the dismal tidings of her nephew's death. The young man had incurred the wrath of a tribe of Liru people, dubbed after the venomous king brown snake, perhaps through some show of disrespect. Whether it had been deliberate or inadvertent was beside the point, for the vindictive tribesmen were on their way to exact their revenge. The Liru warriors found Kuniya's nephew, curled up by the base of Uluru for some sleep, and launched a volley

of spears at their sleeping target. Startled, her nephew leapt to his feet and darted off in the opposite direction, ducking and swerving, but alas, he received three spears to the back and bled to death on the spot. The pitted blemishes along the base of the rock, they say, were from the spears that missed their target.

The inconsolable Kuniya, blinded with rage, charged west and collided with Liru warriors at Mutitjulu. The unapologetic warriors only worsened their fates when, instead of extending even a perfunctory apology, they ridiculed her for her hysterical state. Undaunted and now doubly determined, Kuniya heaped handfuls of sand all over her body and channeled the deepest, darkest corners of her supernatural powers. It was as if her fury had materialized into a sort of numbing, toxic gas that spread forth and dulled the warriors. With nothing more than a *wana* in hand, she swung forth and bashed the head of the Liru warrior chief. Blood poured out from the gash in the Liru's head as he stumbled backwards and cried out for aid, but the rest of his men had dispersed. Kuniya took another step forward and struck his bloodied head a second time, killing him. When the Liru slumped over, his shield dropped to the ground with a great clang. Soon after, Kuniya shifted into her serpent form and spent her remaining days on Uluru, and there she supposedly remains as a twisting dark line on the rock's eastern wall. The two blows she dealt the Liru chief were apparently so powerful that they, too, left their footprints in the form of two deep fissures on the opposite wall. The Liru's shield transformed into a stand-alone boulder.

The western face of the Uluru is the setting of yet another interesting fable. This third story is centered on Lungkata, a conniving and rapacious, thick-bodied lizard with a stone-blue tongue. Lungkata set sweeping swathes of spinifex ablaze on the way to Uluru, essentially initiating a conservation method known as “patch burning.” Although seemingly counterintuitive, flames were used to encourage the growth of the local foliage, as not only did fire breed more bush food, it warded off the wild animals that would have threatened the food source of the resident tribes. As implied by its name, the Uluru plains were interspersed with small swatches of burnt grass, which served as natural fire deterrents, discouraging destructive, uncontrollable wildfires.

Lungkata pitched a camp in one of the caves on the western cliff side of Uluru. Later that day, he headed to the southern base of the rock to fix himself a meal. It was here that he came upon a whimpering emu, or *kalaya*, limping from the spear lodged in its side. The bird was freshly wounded, most likely by a nearby group of *panpanpalala* (bird hunters), but Lungkata, whose better judgment was clouded by his growling stomach, ignored social protocol and snatched up the bird for himself.

As predicted, Lungkata was soon approached by the *panpanpalala*, having traced the smoke from the lizard spirit's cooking fire, who asked if he had seen the emu in question. Rather than admit his crime, Lungkata hid the uneaten emu meat, spat out a snarling “no,” and gruffly sent them on their way. The *panpanpalala* recognized the aroma of roasted *kalaya*, but, inhibited by the lack of proof, they retreated from the area. It was only much later, when they detected the track marks left behind by the bird, that they realized that they had been deceived, but by that point, Lungkata was long gone. Shortly after the hunters' departure, he swept up the remaining *kalaya* meat and scurried towards his cave, leaving a trail of bird bits in his hurry. The emu's thigh, now a protrusion in the rock the locals call “Kalaya Tjunta,” can still be seen near the Mutitjulu Waterhole.

The *panpanpalala* raced back to the base of the rock, and, following the trail of *kalaya* meat, they chased Lungkata to the western face of Uluru. Unable to scale such a steep surface, the clever hunters raised a tremendous bonfire on the ledge below Lungkata's cave. About halfway into Lungkata's climb, he became overwhelmed by the stifling billows of smoke wafting northwards. The lizard began to choke and struggled to keep his footing, but he was ultimately unable to escape the roaring, rapidly rising flames. The burning lizard slid down the side of the rock, the skin peeling off his body clinging to the rock like skid marks. Lungkata began to dissolve, and by the time he reached solid ground, he was no more than a tiny pebble. The dark discoloring still seen on the western face of the rock, they say, are the scorch marks left behind by the bonfire. The story of Lungkata serves as a cautionary tale for the selfish and the devious, and it reminds people that Uluru is not a beast to be taken lightly.

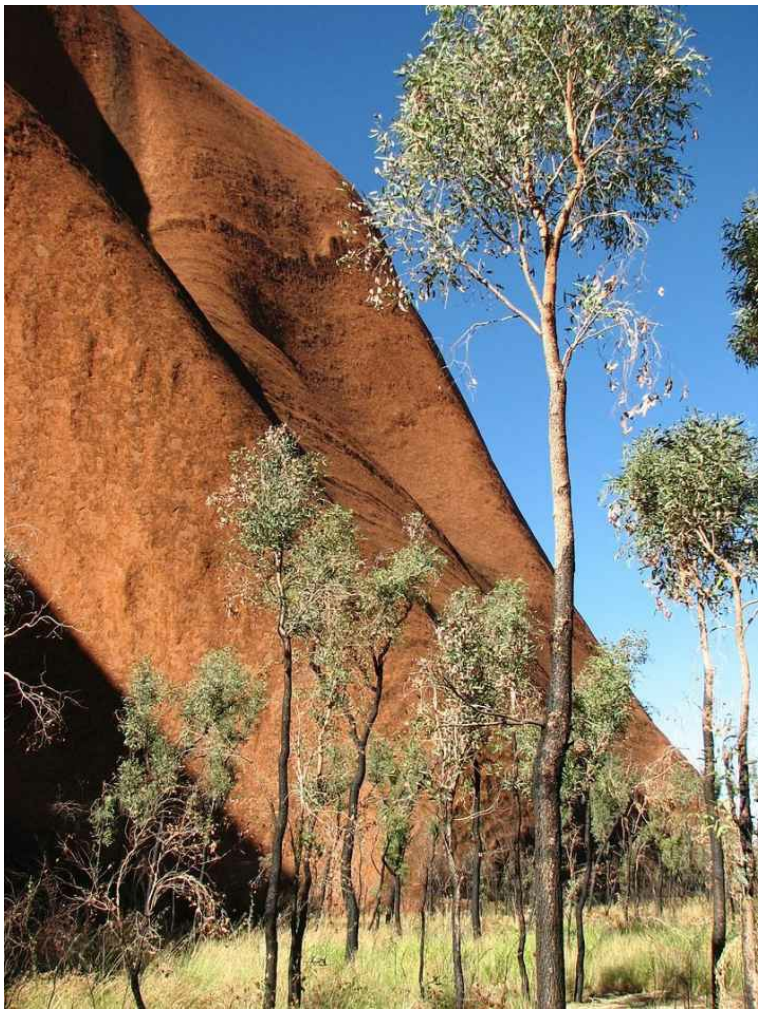
Backstories of Anangu creation deities are also depicted in Uluru rock

paintings. One of the caves in the Uluru Skull recounts the story of Mamaragan, also referred to as “Namarrkon,” the Anangu lord of lightning. Mamaragan, painted in white ash, is eerily portrayed with massive black eyes, a body much too slender for its head, and stone axes for limbs.

According to local lore, Mamaragan lives in a puddle in the clouds and spoke in claps of thunder, a discreet being who is rarely, if ever, seen by mankind. Mamaragan regularly siphons light from the sun's rays to charge the bows of light on his shoulders, which dims the skies, prompting nightfall. He is a temperamental god who glides around on his storm cloud like a hover-board, hurling spears of lightning at trees and slicing through clouds with his ax appendages.

Mamaragan visits Uluru without fail every year during the *kunumeleng*, meaning “the first storms of the wet season.” His visits are a reminder of the ramifications that ensue when one abuses the rock, or whenever one summons a deity for some unethical, self-serving purpose. Those who flout Anangu traditional law may also be used as target practice. It is Mamaragan, they say, who choreographs Uluru's famous thunderstorms. Photographers and storm chasers often drive out to the rock at the peak of monsoon season, all to witness nature's magic: the dream-like mass of swirling clouds; streaks of electric-blue; and fleeting lightning bolts amidst the violet, flashing skies as torrents of rain cascade down the sides of the lone rock.

The Anangu protectors of Uluru and its surrounding land continued to defend and preserve the sacred site in the following centuries without intervention, but this would soon change with the arrival of white colonists who foolishly failed to heed the tribesmen's warnings.

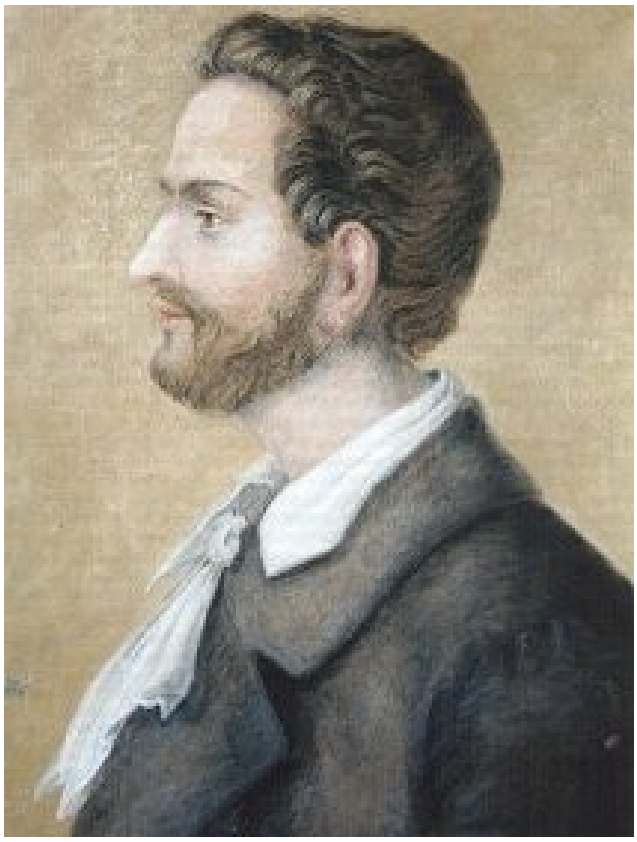


A picture of trees at the base of Uluru

Unwelcome Visitors

"This place, Uluru, is sacred. Do not say that it is sacred only for a short time. It is a sacred object. We, the Anangu, are the keepers of it." – attributed to an unnamed Anangu elder

Outsiders with narcissistic ulterior motives had never been welcome in Uluru, and one of the first outlanders to learn this lesson the hard way was a renowned Prussian scientist and naturalist, Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt, who vanished without a trace in what seemed to be an expedition gone wrong. The fact that Leichhardt was a seasoned, well-established explorer only made his disappearance all the more intriguing.



Leichhardt

Leichhardt had previously completed two major tours across the continent before tackling what was his most ambitious mission yet: crossing Australia from east to west, an onerous journey that cut through the menacing Red Center of Australia on the back of his trusty stallion. He was well-aware of the very real and plausible prospect of death, which could be almost inevitable in his line of work. He may also have been hardened by all the close brushes he had encountered with death over the years.

Leichhardt, who relocated to the area in 1842, had only been in Australia for four years when his local celebrity began to take flight. He was lauded as one of the country's finest and most fearless explorers, one who survived a grueling 18-month-long trek from the north to the west on Australia's east coast. Leichhardt and his team were on the road for such an extensive period of time that they had been assumed dead. When Leichhardt and his entourage, surprisingly intact, staggered back into Sydney in March of 1846, many fainted in fright, believing they had seen a ghost. Needless to say, the seemingly invincible Leichhardt shot to stardom almost overnight, and

wealthy patrons and universities scrambled to sponsor the future expeditions of the “Prince of Explorers.”

On February 25, 1848, Leichhardt, along with “two friends, two hired laborers, and two ‘black-fellows’ [Aborigines],” brought with them 50 bullocks, 20 mules, seven horses, and mountains of food and supplies as they forged forth from their starting point in the Condamine River, eager to traverse uncharted (to the Europeans) territory. The first few weeks went by with little incident, as evidenced by reports from witnesses, but just like that, as if with a snap of a finger, they were gone. Leichhardt and company were last seen on the April 3 at Coogon's McPherson's Station in southern Queensland.

News of Leichhardt's disappearance divided the public. Some mourned the tragic loss of the eminent scientist and demanded answers, while others, presumably counting on yet another false alarm, maintained hope. Those in the first camp wasted no time in launching a string of over a dozen inquests, both government-financed and privately-funded, into the crew's disappearance. Along with Patrick White's award-winning novel *Voss*, which found its muse in Leichhardt, publishers have released over 13 full-length books about the ill-fated quest, that doesn’t count the stacks of scholarly papers and government-issued reports that have since been published.

Historians have come up with numerous theories regarding the cause of the crew's disappearance. Leichhardt and his men, one historian posited, had become gravely ill from consuming water from a contaminated spring and slowly died off, one after the other. The crew lost their way, claimed another, and eventually exhausted their food rations while unable to locate proper nourishment. A different historian pointed a finger at the terrible floods that engulfed Queensland in the spring of that year, while another suggested death by wildfire. A more creative theory implied that Leichhardt had been wolfed down by a shark while swimming in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Then, there were those who strayed outside of the box of natural disasters. Some insisted that the crew had been killed as a result of a heated exchange with one of the native tribes, while others wondered if a mutiny of sorts could have sealed their fates.

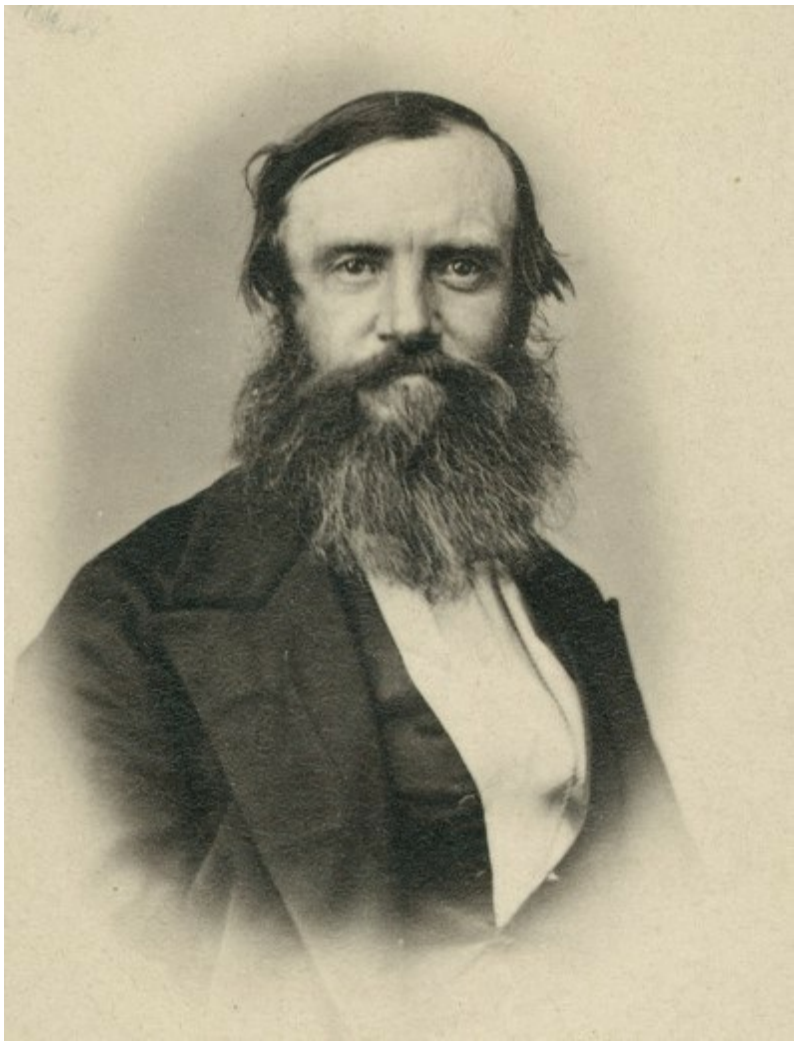
Theories circulated by the second camp were far less morbid. Leichhardt and his men, said one, had ascended to a new state of enlightenment while staying with an Anangu tribe and chose to sever their ties with society, electing instead to spend the rest of their days amongst the natives. The popularity of this particular theory was fueled by the rumored sightings of a "very old white man [with] long yellow hair and [a] beard," appropriately nicknamed the "wild white man," spotted in an aboriginal camp near Uluru.

Scores of abandoned, half-buried equipment, rusted metal scraps, and frayed shreds of clothing have been recovered in the area over the years, but only one item has ever been linked to the missing crew. This item, known as the "Leichhardt Plate," was discovered attached to a mysteriously scorched pistol jammed into a boab tree in 1900 by Sturt Creek. The native stockman who came across the relic found the letter "L" etched into the tree, which many believe was almost certainly the handiwork of Leichhardt (who, like many other explorers, had a habit of carving his initials into tree trunks to mark his trail). If so, such a clue indicated that the team began to head north for some reason, rather than the straight east-to-west route most assumed they were taking.

Bushman, historian, archaeologist, and author of *Where is Dr. Leichhardt?* Dr. Darrel Lewis was one of the many self-appointed detectives who launched their own investigations into the matter. Lewis and his crew scoured the presumed route of Leichhardt's team with the aid of a quad-bike, a four-wheel drive, and even a helicopter, but like the others, he returned home empty-handed. According to Lewis, "Ultimately, no answer can yet prove which route the expedition took or where or how it met its end. Until the time that some conclusive piece of evidence is discovered – something like Leichhardt's journals hidden in a dry cave or perhaps a heap of 1840s-period surveying gear – arguments about Leichhardt's final resting place will remain a matter of probabilities rather than certainties."

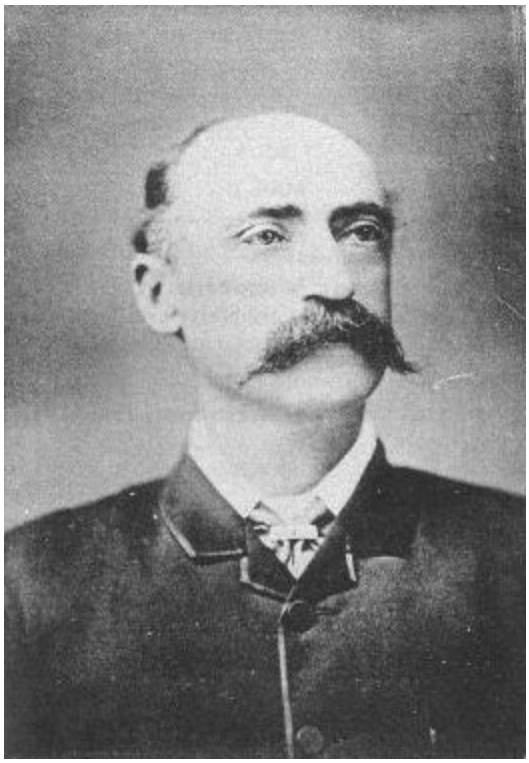
The lack of concrete clues and the inexplicable elements of the mystery bred a third class of theories, one that involved the paranormal. Some Uluru locals, for instance, believed that the mighty rock had punished Leichhardt and company for entering its terrain uninvited and openly disrespecting the land, and that they had been erased from existence via Uluru's dark magic.

Leichhardt's journey was the perfect example of a hazardous, but stout-hearted expedition, and despite the almost certainly fatal results, others thus continued on with the challenge and traversed Australia's unforgiving deserts in the name of science and fame, though not necessarily in that order. In 1870, construction of the first-ever cross-country telegraph system commenced, an epochal project spearheaded by South Australian Superintendent of Telegraphs Charles Todd. Todd and his team consulted the maps charted by John McDouall Stuart, the first to complete a European cross-country expedition of the continent, traveling from the south to the north. With Stuart's maps in hand, Todd split his crew into three, each assigned to a respective direction – northern, central, and southern – and ordered them to lay the overland telegraph wire that would run from Adelaide to Darwin. His team installed a total of 36,000 poles, pins, and insulators, along with galvanized telegraph wires that stretched 1,988 miles long, setting the government back a total of £128,000, roughly $2.9 million today. The pivotal installation of this communication system propelled the entire continent into the future and allowed adventurers from all backgrounds to more easily explore the Red Center.



Stuart

A Bristol-born explorer named William Ernest Giles was among the aspiring and competitive trailblazers determined to complete Leichhardt's unfinished business: examining and documenting the topography beyond the Darling River. In 1872, Giles was commissioned by Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, one of Australia's most celebrated leading botanists, to lead a voyage that aimed to survey a region of central Australia that lay to the west of the new overland telegraph system. With that, Giles and his humble crew set off to scout out the obscure land, first traversing the plains between the Rawlinson Range and Charlotte Waters, and later the area between Missionaries' Plain and Finke Valley. Giles and his men, however, failed to find adequate water and sustenance, so they were ultimately forced to return home.



Giles

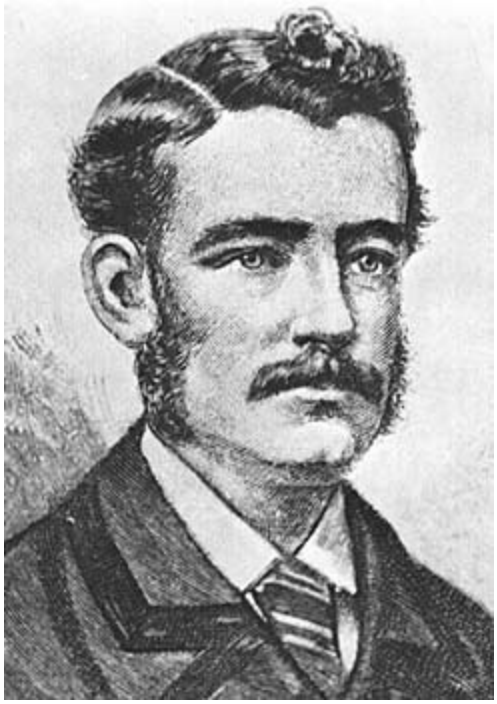
The chance encounter between Giles and Uluru took place on the veteran explorer's fourth expedition in May 1875, which was funded by Sir Thomas Elder, a wealthy business magnate, politician, and philanthropist most remembered for importing some of Australia's first camels. Giles assumed that his previous expeditions were preparation enough for his voyage into the beating heart of the Red Center, but the volatile nature and inherent dangers of the wild of the came down on his expedition like a ton of bricks not long after they passed the West Australian border. Giles expressed his consternation in his journal that evening, writing, “I have never visited any part of Australia so devoid of human life.”

Giles and his team were slowed down by a familiar dilemma: their failure to locate a potable water source in the Great Victoria Desert. That problem plagued them for 12 long days, and had they chosen to forgo the camels that Elder had purchased for them, they would have certainly died of dehydration. Fortunately for the group, their luck soon turned when they happened upon the Queen Victoria Spring. The crew spent a week replenishing their strength and stocks before proceeding further westward until they eventually wound

up on the desert plain of the sacred rock.

It was, however, Kata Tjuta, that first smiled down upon them, thereby making Giles the first European on record to lay his eyes upon the cluster of domed hills. Initially, Giles intended to name the hill formation “Mount Mueller” after the baron, his primary patron, but the German-Australian botanist repudiated the honor, requesting that the distinction be awarded to Queen Olga of Wurttemberg, the Spanish queen consort, instead. It was from the top of Mount Olga, they say, that Giles' gaze fell upon Uluru. Unlike Leichhardt, Giles lived to tell the tale, and the crew completed their expedition when they reached Perth on the 24th of November.

While Giles is often credited as the first European explorer to discover Uluru, he is often made to share the title with a rival, slightly lesser-known adventurer by the name of William Christie Gosse. The 30-year-old England-born voyager, many chroniclers claim, had beaten Giles to the punch by two whole years. The actual discovery of Uluru, according to official records, took place on July 19th, 1873, a milestone ticked by Giles and his cortege, which consisted of his second-in-command, Edwin Berry, two other European explorers surnamed Nilen and Winnall, his brother Henry as collector, three camel drivers of Afghan descent; a young male aboriginal guide, and a small army of horses and camels. However, it was Gosse who gave Uluru its Westernized name, “Ayers Rock,” as a tribute to the Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers. Gosse was also the first European explorer to make the climb to the famously level top of the inselberg, accompanied by an Afghan guide known only as “Khamran.” Moreover, it was Gosse who christened the Musgrave Ranges and its tallest peak, Moun Woodroffe, the former named after Governor and Surveyor General Anthony Musgrave.



Gosse

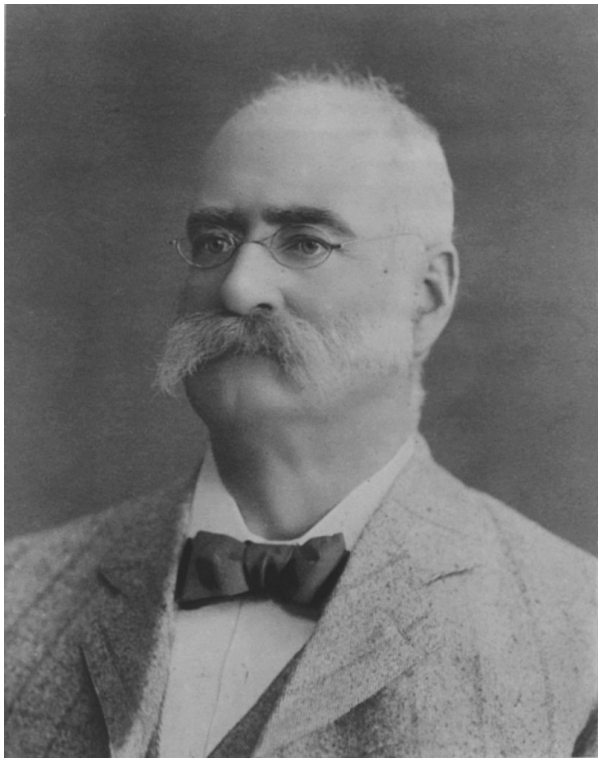
Ayers

The following passage from Gosse's diary describes the explorer's first impression of the Uluru: “The hill, as I approached, presented a most peculiar appearance, the upper portion being covered with holes or caves. When I got clear of the sand hills and was only two miles distant and the hill, for the first time, coming fairly in view, what [sic] was my astonishment to find it was one immense rock rising abruptly from the plain...At 34 miles, [I] reached [the] foot of the rock; only found enough water to replenish our bags, but none for the camels...No sign of water on this (the north) side; the water runs into large shallow basins about 100 yards from [the] foot of [the] rock. The good country [extends] for two miles around the rock. I have named this Ayers Rock, after Sir Henry Ayers...[Uluru] appears more wonderful every time I look at it, and I may say it is a sight worth riding over 84 miles of

spinifex sand hills to see...”

For the most part, Uluru remained largely undisturbed for the next two decades or so, much to the relief of the local tribes. Then, in May 1894, the transient spell of peace was disrupted by the Horn Expedition.

The Horn Expedition, styled after its mastermind, an affluent entrepreneur from Adelaide named William Augustus Horn, was a collaboration between the Universities of Adelaide, Sydney, and Melbourne. The crew, captained by Professor Ralph Tate and his right-hand man, reputable geologist and botanist Dr. J. A. Watt, was tasked with conducting the most in-depth survey of Central Australia, mainly the areas surrounding the MacDonnell Ranges, to date. Other members of the crew included Walter Baldwin Spencer, a zoology professor from the University of Melbourne, who played both zoologist and photographer; Charles Winnecke, the prominent expert of Central Australia who served as the chief expedition guide; and Edward Charles Stirling, an ethnologist and the first physiology professor at the University of Adelaide who directed the crew's anthropological research.



Tate

The expedition lasted no more than three months, but the mission was a raving success, as the copious amounts of data they gathered markedly advanced scholars' understanding of Central Australia in various fields, ranging from its geology and resources to the different species of plants and animals that resided in those parts. There was also a vast improvement in the previously scant knowledge of the local aboriginal cultures. Spencer, the team's official photographer, captured some of the first images taken of the Red Center, including the first of Uluru.

The following passage from Spencer’s journal provides readers with a glimpse into the crew's findings in the land of the sacred rock: “Mount Olga [a] lovely salmon pink in [the] morning with blue shadow under lofty dome-shaped tops. Ayers Rock [is a] somewhat brighter red color in [the] form of a flattened dome. As [we] neared [Olga and Ayers], it gradually broke up into separate rounded peaks. [Lands around the formations] covered with Mulga [trees]. In WH are numerous holes dug out by blacks (natives) in search of honey ants... [We found] small 'baskets' about one foot long and three inches broad and deep, made of possum skin wound round with string of (possum hair) with emu feathers, containing flints and a [necklace] of rat tails.”

In a separate passage, Spencer listed some of the local flora, of which there were over 400 different species, and fauna: “Sandy ridges in succession to Ayers Rock. Oaks [include] Mulga, Porcupine, Ptilotus codnocarpus, Pituri, [and a few] E. Gamophyll. Near Ayers Rock [there is] a Salicina purple blue plum (Sanatalum Lanceolatum) ripe at Olga. Also [found were] Whalenbergia Gracilis (small, five-petaled flowers) with red bugs on it. At [the] camp at Ayers, [we also] found that lubras had collected some 54 sugar ants and two scorpions. [Later, I] went out with Watt to copy native drawings on hollows at [the] base of and amongst fallen rocks around Ayers Rock.”

Another passage details his observations of a group of Anangu natives preparing two red kangaroos for supper: “[We] watched them extract two sinews from each leg by means of cutting with stone at [the] end of woomera [sic] through skin. Then [they] took hitch with yam stick round [the] sinew and pulled with [their] foot against the rump. Then [they] stretched [the] sinew with [their] teeth and cut [it] off with [a] woomera...[A] small opening [was] made into [the] abdominal wall – intestines [then] pulled out and [the]

hole stitched up with [a] short stick sharpened to a [point] by teeth...[The meat was] laid in [a] shallow depression in [the] ground, in which fire [was] previously made, and embers scattered all over, but by no means covering [the] whole body. [The kangaroos were] cooked for about one hour, [then] the ribs cut through with [a] yam stick...Liver, heart, etc. [were also] taken out and eaten...If desired to be further cooked, [the meat was] rolled in ashes."

The Second Wave

"Yes, this is a holy cave. I alone truly know about this place. I was put into this place. Yes, my fathers and grandfathers entrusted me with this cave. This holy cave...This is my great ceremony, my holy ceremony, my great camp with its holy tree and Mutitjulu on this side is holy. Ayers Rock is holy. I am Uluru, and these things are mine." – Paddy Uluru of the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission

Much to the dismay of the Anangu tribes, this was merely the beginning of the *piranpa* (white people) invasion. In the spring of 1918, Australian native communities protested when the Commonwealth government converted several tracts of land between the borders of the Northern Territory, Western Australia, and Southern Australia into aboriginal reserves. These "sanctuaries," not unlike the Native American reservations and ghettos established by the American government, were founded with the intention of herding the natives into and confining them to enclosed, secured spaces away from the general population.

The Aborigines Act of 1897 called for the dismantling of the Aborigines Protection Board and installed the Aborigines Department in its place, which was headed by the Chief Protector. The Chief Protector was entrusted with the responsibilities such a post traditionally entailed, including the management of the department's day-to-day affairs, the efficient delegation of tasks to subordinates, and so forth, until the publishing of the Aborigines Act of 1905. This ordinance effectively granted the bearer of the title legal guardianship over every aboriginal child under the age of 16 in Western Australia. In other words, the Chief Protector was legally allowed to extract aboriginal children from their homes, and then rehouse them in children's centers or put them to work if he so pleased.

In 1911, the Northern Territory was officially absorbed into the Commonwealth domain. Still, all Australian laws forged prior to the acquisition remained relatively unchanged until the institution of the Aboriginal Ordinance of 1918, which merged the 1910 Act (South Australia) and the 1911 ordinance. In one fell swoop, the Chief Protector was appointed legal guardian of all aboriginal children in the Northern Territory, and native communities in the area were forced to concede ownership of their lands to those sworn to "protect" them. The Chief Protector, along with Australian law enforcement, were vested with even more authority. A passage from the ordinance reads, "[The] Chief Protector may undertake the care, custody, or control of any 'aboriginal or half-caste' if in his opinion it is necessary or desirable...An 'aboriginal or half-caste' remaining within a prohibited area is guilty of an offense and may be removed [by a police officer]."

In 1920, Uluru and its surrounding land was officially classified as an aboriginal reserve and was thenceforth to be referred to as the "South-Western" or "Petermann Reserve."

At this point in time, Uluru-bound tourists traveling for pleasure were few and far between, as many remained disinclined to brave the harsh conditions the Red Center landmark promised. Daredevils and quest chasers, on the other hand, were another matter. In October 1930, Sydney native, World War I veteran, and pilot Errol Hampton Coote became one of the first (if not the first) to touch down on the sacred rock. Coote exited the aptly-named *Golden Quest* – a reconnaissance aircraft known as a Gypsy Moth – and allowed the sweltering heat of the semi-arid desert to caress his skin.

Like many others before and after him, Coote was aching to sink his teeth into some gold. Sadly, Coote's jitters, as it turns out, were not unwarranted. It did not take long for the pilot and former journalist to realize that he had bitten off far more than he could chew. The gold-prospecting expedition he had been entrusted to lead, said to have been the most expensive of its kind in its day, was a complete and utter bust, condemned by Arthur Blakely, the Minister for Home Affairs, as nothing more than "a costly and useless trip to Ayers Rock."

Peter Jones' picture of the surface of Uluru

The eruption of the gold craze was, in large part, triggered by the beguiling legend of Lasseter's Reef. Those who heard of this gripping tale of lost treasure, hidden in plain sight, were immediately hooked, hankering to chip off a piece of the gold-studded quartz reef for themselves. According to man of the hour Harold Bell Lasseter of Sydney, it measured "seven miles long, four to seven feet [in height], and 12 feet [in width]." It was in 1929 that the paths of Lasseter and Coote intertwined. Understandably transfixed by the charismatic Lasseter's thrilling story, the well-connected Coote assisted in founding the firm that would go on to subsidize the former's pursuit of the reef and offered his piloting services for the First Lasseter Expedition.

Lasseter, or so he claimed, was 17 when he came upon the shimmering mega reef tucked away in the southwest nook of the Northern Territory, roughly a stone's throw away from Uluru. His discovery of the treasure trove was accidental, having transpired after a failed ruby prospecting venture in the eastern part of the MacDonnell Ranges. Even more mystifying, his horses died of unknown causes just hours after his chance discovery. The young and

then-inexperienced adventurer became disorientated, eventually wandering off course, and would have most likely expired had he not run across a kind Afghan camel driver and his travel companion, a surveyor named Harding. Unable to smother the reef's siren song, Lasseter spent the next three decades searching high and low for it, but he was met with bitter disappointment each time.

As one might have guessed, nothing ever came of Lasseter's elusive “reef of gold of untold wealth.” After the umpteenth coincidentally timed mishap, several of his crew members branded him a fraud, which sparked off a number of tense exchanges and disagreements. The quarreling parties eventually parted ways, leaving the disgraced Lasseter to continue the wild goose chase on his own. His credibility took another hit when people began to draw attention to the suspicious similarities between Lasseter's story and the plot of *Golden Buckle*, authored by John Sayces, which was published at least 10 years prior to the popularization of the tale.

Lasseter ultimately fell from grace and written off by the bulk of society as a liar and a cheat. The last known sighting of the discredited adventurer placed him at the Uluru desert, accompanied by two camels, some time in the early months of 1931. His skeletal remains were discovered in a secluded desert cave later that year. His camels had broken loose from their restraints, darting off into the distance with his belongings and leaving him for dead. A group of Anangu tribesmen who happened upon him attempted to nurse him back to health, but all efforts were futile, as his was body irreversibly battered by a combination of starvation, dehydration, and exposure. Lasseter did not leave behind a map or any written form of directions to the alleged reef.

That same year, Walter Gills (in some accounts, Giles) became the first recreational tourist to visit Uluru, traveling by camel.

As per the prevailing pattern of forced evangelization engendered by the white colonization of aboriginal lands, Ayers Rock was soon bedeviled by a small crush of Christian missionaries. These missionaries took their cue from a pioneer in the evangelization of Uluru, E. E. Kramer, who came to the blessed rock in 1928 as, part of a group of gospellers from a German Lutheran church dispatched to the Northern Territory. Kramer, who was escorted by Tiger Tjalkalyiri, also known as “Charcoal Jerry” and “Douglas

Dalgalyerry," a local guide of the *Nyintaka*, or perentie lizard tribe with strong ancestral connections to the Mala tribe, headlined the first Christian service just south of Uluru. He is also credited with being the first non-native Australian to acknowledge the holiness of Uluru, referring to it as "the most sacred spot in all the country around where natives come for their ceremonies." By then, the evangelists had founded at least seven Lutheran missions in the Northern Territory.

An Anangu tribeswoman named Julie Brumby wrote of their arrival, "Missionaries came on camels and they saw my family as they were camping in the bush. One of them said, 'I am going to make you a place that will be your home at Areyonga. I'm going to take you Areyonga and make a house for you to live in.' So they took us. They walked, and I was on a camel. We would camp and travel. I was very young and had no idea what was happening."

The missionaries in the Petermann Reserve were soon joined by caravans of dog hunters, miners, policemen, Native Welfare Patrol Officers, and more voyagers and treasure seekers. During this time, non-aboriginal pastoralists (cattle or sheep farmers) were also struggling to assert their control over the ambiguously situated pastures next to the reserve. Tensions reached new heights when over-grazing and a particularly dreadful dry spell laid waste to the local foliage, resulting in a tussle between the Anangu tribes and pastoralists over the shrinking food supply. The conflict, in turn, led to a spike in police presence.

More recreational tourists began to trickle into the reserve during the early 1940s, but the better part of Uluru's visitors were still gold prospectors emboldened by the passing of another new law, which pared down the size of local reserves and thereby granted them the right to legally mine for gold and other minerals in the area. In 1948, a vehicle-friendly road that culminated in Uluru was constructed, and it was only then that leisurely paced tours began.

On August 30th, 1950, Alice Springs resident Len Tuit organized the first school trip to Uluru, bringing with him 23 lads from Sydney's Knox Grammar School, the youngest of which was only 14, and special guest Charles Pearcy Mountford, a prominent anthropologist and expert on indigenous Australian culture. The students raced to the top of the sacred

rock, with the fastest pair, as reported by a local paper, scaling Uluru in just 25 minutes. On the 13th of September, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a transcript of a radio message recorded by Knox master and chaperon A. W. Briggs, who was narrating a report of their trip in real time: “The boys are having a grand time, and the scientific team are working like beavers. The entomologists have collected beetles, grasshoppers, butterflies, bats, lizards, and scorpions to fulfill their special assignment from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization at Canberra. The botany group, which has had a job commissioned to them by the National Herbarium in Sydney, have been collecting the many small flowering plants prevalent after the extraordinary wet season. A geology party has completed a map traverse of Ayers Rock and made a geological survey of the region. They have collected many rock and mineral specimens and ancient native implements.”

A picture of people climbing Uluru

Briggs appeared to recognize that the party's observation of local Anangu rituals was a gift in itself: “At the *corroboree* (aboriginal dance ceremony) last Sunday night, 10 natives performed chants and kangaroo dances by firelight as part of the initiation ceremony which marked the graduation of the

two boys into manhood. It was an unusual privilege for this Knox party to see this ceremony, which is secret and not often witnessed by white people."

Be that as it may, the schoolboys, some say, cashed in their privilege in one regard: "At the summit, we found a stone cabin with a bottle in it containing the names of four earlier climbers – Monseigneurs McKinnon, Bechevaise, Clune, and Stanes." There was no indication that the press reached out to the Anangu for comment, but they could not have been thrilled with these climbers for defacing what was to them a most holy monument.

Ayers Rock was officially declared a national park that same year, and by 1955, the enterprising Tuit, who took note of Uluru's sudden explosion in popularity, referred to as a "tourist Mecca" in the Northern Territory papers the previous year, launched his own private tour company. These tours were far from luxurious, but Tuit did the best he could given his meager resources. The first tour buses, which transported tourists from Alice Springs to Uluru, could only accommodate a maximum of 20 passengers. Visitors who opted for the overnight package were directed to camping grounds with flimsy tents and shepherded into a former army marquee for meals. Moreover, drinking water was rationed, as the commodity had to be bussed in from Curtin Springs. Potable water remained at the top of Tuit's list of headaches until he saved up for a drilling rig, which he used to tap into a freshwater spring roughly 85 feet underground, packed with a flow of 380 liters per hour.

The Anangu population at the Petermann Reserve had been visibly dwindling over the years, but the census dipped even further as the number of tourists steadily climbed, many of them fleeing to other locales in Central Australia. Many of those who split were distressed by the brutality the aboriginals suffered at the hands of Australian law enforcement.

One incident that was often cited was an arrest gone awry in 1934. Three Anangu men were arrested, based on nothing but hearsay, for murdering a white Australian man who had committed the unforgivable crime of unveiling the secrets of the Anangu men's business to his wife. Much to the displeasure of their arresting officers, the suspects wriggled out of their cuffs and bolted off into the desert, but they were eventually located at a cave by the Mutitjulu Waterhole. A scuffle ensued, which resulted in the shooting death of one of the suspects, and the remaining suspects managed to make a

break for it. The suspects' families, along with the rest of the Anangu community, blasted the authorities for their negligence. Unsurprisingly, the officer who fired the fatal shot received nothing more than a slap on the wrist, prompting many disheartened Anangu families to seek greener pastures elsewhere, with some shifting to the western fringes of the reserve and others southeast.

In 1957, former employee of the Chief Protector's office and Aborigine specialist William “Bill” Edward Harney was appointed the first ranger to manage Ayers Rock National Park. The following year, Kata Tjuta was incorporated into the national park, and the name of the park was updated to “Ayers Rock-Mount Olga National Park” to highlight this addition. In the same breath, Ayers Rock and Mount Olga were moved out of Petermann Reserve territory, much to the exasperation of the local tribes, and placed under the jurisdiction of the Northern Territory Reserves Board.

The gentrification of Uluru was further advanced by the prestigious Cotterill family, who many say revolutionized tourism in Central Australia with their family-owned company, Kings Canyon Tours. Jack Cotterill, most famed for forging a lucrative partnership with Connellan Airways, the first “fly in, fly out” tours in the area, began to sketch out a proposal for Uluru that same year. At the same time, a proper lodge was erected at the park, courtesy of Alice Spring Tours, Ltd. The new cabin, built out of corrugated iron, not unlike those used for shipping containers, was outfitted with six bedrooms, two bathrooms, a dining hall, a working manually operated hot water tank, and other amenities. In 1959, Eddie Connellan of Connellan Airways rolled out an airstrip on a plot of land on the northern edge of the park, kickstarting the first set of Uluru-destined fly-in, fly out tours.

Ironically, the *piranpa*, who initially fought tooth and nail to keep the Anangu caged inside Uluru, began to campaign to keep the Anangu from returning to the park throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nevertheless, authorities were ultimately powerless to stave off the rightful owners of the land. Former Anangu residents of Uluru who had resettled elsewhere to escape the influx of tourists, as well as Anangu tribesmen from neighboring regions, continued to make the pilgrimage to the hallowed rock and reunite with family members.

Meanwhile, the new marketing team burnt the midnight oil to promote the park, which evidently bore ample fruit. In 1962, the park received a record number of 5,462 visitors. Despite the Anangu's repeated requests for tourists to refrain from climbing Uluru, a right strictly reserved for the senior male members of the tribes, park authorities set up a metal chain that ran from the base of the Uluru to its flat peak just two years later, advertising the sacred rock as a climbing site.

Around the same time, the government of the Commonwealth instituted a succession of thinly veiled policies that aimed to “assimilate” or integrate the aboriginals into Australian society. Authorities financed the establishment of more aboriginal reserves and settlements, such as one in the *Kaltukatjara,* or in English, “Docker River,” in a bid to make it more difficult for the Anangu to return to their homeland, and to sever the tribes' access to the land's limited resources. It did not take long, however, for the authorities' plan to backfire. About a year or two after the installation of the metal chain at Uluru, the government decided to terminate pastoral subsidies previously allotted to the Anangu tribes. Thus, throngs of Anangu pastoralists, now ejected from their leases, returned to Uluru.

More often than not, the relationship between the local Anangu population and foreign tourists was amicable, or at the very least civil. That being said, their relationship with the park's management was an entirely different matter. The park's board members hassled the government's Native Welfare Branch for months on end, chastising the authorities for their lack of initiative to prevent the Anangu from entering the park. The government's assimilation program, it appeared, was a flop in more ways than one. The Anangu had indeed adopted certain aspects of the Australian way of life and had leapt into the new century with their donkeys, camels, and automobiles. Their new modes of transportation allowed them to scoot up to Uluru, where they peddled Uluru-themed keepsakes and local artifacts to tourists, in no time.

By the 1970s, Uluru and Kata Tjuta had become the most popular tourist attraction in all of Australia. In 1972, management authorized the construction of the park's first “aboriginal business” by the Mutitjulu Waterhole, dubbed the “Ininti Store,” to be operated by the Docker River Social Club. The Ininti was essentially a general store that catered to tourists

and its aboriginal inhabitants. While the Ininti's customer base experienced a major lull in the mid-1980s, mainly due to being overtaken by the Yulara Resort, the establishment itself remains in service to this day, albeit with new management: Gumlake Property, Ltd. Its sister establishment, the Ininti Cafe, located in Uluru's Cultural Center, carries a variety of books, postcards, clothing, and other mementos that celebrate Anangu culture.

The Ininti Store's quick success was tainted by the outbreak of wildfires that wreaked havoc in Uluru towards the latter half of the 1970s. The upsurge in wildfires, which demonstrated the *piranpa's* unfamiliarity with Anangu land, was in part attributable to the extinction of the tribes' patch-burning practice, which they took with them when they began to move out of Uluru in droves during the 1940s. In 1976, Uluru was struck by not one, but two closely-spaced wildfires, which destroyed up to 75% of the entire park.

1976 proved to be a bittersweet year for the Anangu, as the freshly issued Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) presented them with the opportunity to reassert their ownership over their soil. The following year, Ayers Rock-Mount Olga National Park became the first of its kind to be named a protectee of the Commonwealth National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1975, most likely occasioned by the devastating wildfires that broke out the previous year. More significantly, the ordinance rendered the park its own separate entity for the first time, which transferred all rights to the park from the Commonwealth to the Director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

In 1979, Aboriginal Land Commissioner and Justice John Toohey presided over a land claims suit filed under the modified Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) of 1976, lodged in an attempt to reclaim a large stretch of land encompassing both the Uluru and the Kata Tjuta. Journalist Jake Waterford of the *Canberra Times* described the details of what is now known as the “Lake Amadeus Luritja Land Claim”: “Earlier [today], Mr. Justice Toohey had ruled that Ayers Rock and the National Park that surrounds it, [as well as] the Olgas, was alienated Crown Land within the meaning of the Land Rights Act, and thus could not be made the subject of a claim.” In other words, Toohey eventually reinstated the Anangu's ownership of the lands to the north and east of Uluru and the Kata Tjuta, acknowledging the 104

traditional owners of Uluru and the 57 of the Kata Tjuta, but he decided against returning the title to the park, which remained under the umbrella of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Another six years dragged by before the Anangu, at long last, succeeded in securing the deed to the national park.

In the early months of 1985, Prime Minister Bob Hawke took the initiative to revise the 1975 National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act, as well as the Land Rights Act, which classed the park as aboriginal land. The park was officially returned to the local Anangu on the 26th of October, with Governor-General Sir Zelman Cowen representing the Commonwealth. The exchange, now remembered as “The Handback,” was marked by a special ceremony set in the oval belonging to the Mutitjulu Anangu tribes.

Predictably, the government's acquiescence came with a pointed stipulation. Only when the Anangu consented to leasing the park property to the National Parks and Wildlife Service for a period of 99 years did the government agree to unhand the deed to Ayers Rock. To sweeten the deal, both parties agreed upon a set price for annual rent costs; the traditional owners of the park would also receive a cut of the park's overall profits. In December of the same year, a new ruling council was established and staffed with primarily Anangu officials. The council's inaugural meeting was scheduled for April 22nd, 1986.

The Mystery and Legacy of the Blessed Rock

“As Fujiyama is to Japan, so should Ayers Rock be to Australia, a sacred mountain and place of pilgrimage in the heart of our continent.” – attributed to Frank Clune, 20th century Australian author and art dealer

The mystique that shrouds Uluru has not waned over time. Rumors about Uluru's Curse circulated at twice the usual pace in the 1970s, when the National Park Ranges offices began to receive, on average, an anonymously posted package each day. These cryptic parcels contained rocks, pebbles, twigs, sand, seeds, and an odd photograph of Uluru or the view from its peak taken from the site without clearance. The unconventional ban on photographs descends from the traditional Anangu belief pertaining to men and women's business. Visitors were asked to resist the urge to snap unlicensed photographs of the intoxicating inselberg, so as to prevent the

Anangu folk from unwittingly coming across a photograph of a blessed site that was restricted to their gender. Almost always, a note of apology was attached to these packages, hence their nickname, “sorry rocks,” with some even specifying the rash of incomprehensible misfortune they encountered following their transgression, which included sudden divorces, car crashes, illnesses, and even the untimely deaths of loved ones.

The bulk of these Sorry Rocks were no larger than a plum, but the NPR offices have also received its fair share of oversized packages. One of the most impressively sized rocks ever sent back to the authorities was posted by an unidentified German family, who had swiped a boulder weighing close to 20 pounds. Even that one was no match for the 70 pound rock that arrived through the mail one day, believed to be posted from southern Australia.

One such apology note, sent by an unnamed tourist from Hong Kong, reads, “When I received the rock, I was so worried that I want [sic] to return it as soon as possible. [In] just one week, my brother broke up with his girlfriend, my father went to the hospital, and he will do heart surgery on the [20th] of January. Anyway, I just want to return to rock to its rightful place and say goodbye to the bad luck!”

In 2017, the NPR offices were reportedly swamped with so many Sorry Rocks that the Anangu became overwhelmed by the number of unsolicited return packages. It was difficult for the Anangu to retrace the origins of the Sorry Rocks, so most were laid to rest on what the tribes referred to as “neutral grounds,” which served to patch up fissures and other areas damaged by erosion and foot traffic. As of 2017, visitors caught attempting to smuggle rocks out of the park were eligible to face substantial fines of up to $8,500.

These spooky stories, while perfect fodder for the campfire, are to most little more than urban legends propagated by the overly superstitious. The real dark side of the Uluru, they say, lies in the real-life deaths and naturally occurring accidents that have transpired on these mystical grounds over the years. Over 40 deaths have been recorded in recent years, the majority of them struck by sudden heart failure while climbing. In addition to them and hapless climbers who slipped and fell to their demise, several airplanes have crashed well within the radius of the sacred rock.

One of the most tragic cases to ever unfold around Uluru is also what is widely considered Australia's most infamous true crime story. It is so infamous, in fact, that the utterance most associated with this tale – “The dingo ate my baby!” – as disturbing as it is erroneous, has become the punchline to various jokes around the globe and continues to be widely referenced in pop culture today.

On August 16, 1980, Lindy and Michael Chamberlain ushered their three children into the back of their canary-yellow Holden Torona and sped off to Ayers Rock for a fairly routine family vacation. The following excerpt is taken from the transcript of Lindy Chamberlain's police interview: “Sunset was six-thirty. I would have been bathing them somewhere between quarter to six and six o'clock...Meanwhile, Michael started to look after tea. Then I picked the baby out of the carry basket...took the basket into the tent, and then carried her down to the campsite. She had wind. I was patting her, walked around with her for a while....It was dark. Between seven and eight. She finally went to sleep…And there was a dingo in the area, actually. It had been there the night before. We'd been talking a bit about them, because the hikers that had camped around there...said to us, 'Don't leave any food out, because they scrounge for it.' And we'd read notices in the toilets, and I'd only seen them that afternoon...[Later that day], my husband said to me, 'Bubby' (Azaria) cried'...So I said, 'Well, I'd better go and see'...On the way to the tent...I saw the dingo coming out of the tent...Then I realized. I thought to myself, the kids...The only thing visible is her head. She'll need...first-aid. As soon as I reached the front of the tent, I could see the blankets scattered. Instinct told me that she wasn't there, the dog had her, but my head told me it wasn't possible.” No trace of little Azaria Chamberlain's body has ever been recovered.

Adding to the family’s woes, both the authorities and the public, who many say leapt to conclusions of infanticide prior to their actual convictions, were convinced that they had murdered their own two-month-old daughter. Many refused to believe that a dingo – an animal that they claimed preferred livestock over humans almost all the time – was behind baby Azaria's death. Armchair psychologists tuned into the media frenzy were repulsed by Lindy's apparently eerily calm demeanor in court, and the press labeled her “cold” and snuck in subtle allusions to her guilt in their coverage of the trials. An

alarming 77% of Australians polled by the press believed Lindy Chamberlain to be guilty of murder.

In 1981, investigators discovered blood markings in the family's Torona, which became one of the primary pieces of evidence prosecutors relied on to secure the convictions of the young couple. After slitting her two-month-old's throat with a pair of scissors, prosecutors claimed, Lindy confessed to and sought the aid of her husband in discarding the corpse. The twisted pair then disposed of the body and framed a non-existent dingo. The two were convicted for their crimes, with Lindy sentenced to life in prison, and Michael, her supposed accomplice, receiving an 18-month suspended sentence.

In 1986, investigators located the jacket Azaria was wearing prior to her disappearance in an area peppered with dingo dens, which the defense argued was key in the liberation of the wrongfully accused couple. Lindy was released from prison on remission shortly thereafter, having served some three years behind bars. In 2010, Lindy succeeded in convincing the Australian courts to list "dingo attack" under Azaria's official cause of death. In mid-June of 2012, Northern Territory coroner Elizabeth Morris testified, "I am satisfied that the evidence is sufficiently adequate, clear, cogent, and exact, and that the evidence excludes all other reasonable possibilities, to find that what occurred on 17 August 1980 was that shortly after Mrs. Chamberlain placed Azaria in the tent, a dingo or dingoes entered the tent, took Azaria, and carried and dragged her from the immediate area."

In 1987, Uluru became one of the first historical sites in the world to be "dual-listed" by the UNESCO for "outstanding natural values and outstanding cultural values." On December 5th, 1993, Uluru made history once more when it became the first Australian landmark to have its aboriginal name reinstated. Thenceforth, the Ayers-Rock Mount Olga National Park was to be known as the "Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park." Chairman of the Committee for Geographic Names Australasia explained, "Dual-naming leads to better cross-cultural communication as it is one of the windows people can utilize to understand more of another culture's heritage." In 1995, park management opened the doors of its Cultural Center for the first time to commemorate the aluminum anniversary of "The Handback."

At the end of the day, whether the urban legends have any truth to them is irrelevant, because those privileged enough to visit the sacred space are supposed to treat the rock with the utmost respect regardless. Sadly, tourists in the 21st century have had no qualms disregarding the Anangu's perfectly reasonable rules, most notably the one asking people to refrain from climbing Uluru. Worse yet, in 2009, tour guide Andre Simpson had to admonish tourists for blasphemously using the rock as a toilet. Simpson fumed, "When people climb up to the top of the rock, there's no toilet facilities up there. They get out of sight...most of them have a toilet roll tucked away. They're [expletive for defecating] on a sacred site."

Inexperienced climbers who had no business climbing Uluru or any other rock also piled on to the park management's already massive burden. In mid-June of 2015, a 27-year-old Taiwanese climber stumbled and trapped himself in a crevice over 65-feet deep for at least 24 hours. *ABC News Australia* reported, "[The climber] was rescued in what police described as a slow and difficult process involving a helicopter and an abseiling operation...Keith Hutton, who coordinated the tourist's rescue, said the operation took 10 hours because of the dangerous conditions of the rock...'We had to take extra special care to make sure everything was anchored off correctly,' said Hutton. 'Everyone was one safety lines because of the sheer drops and where we were.'"

Only recently have authorities declared Uluru to be completely off limits to recreational climbers, a policy that is due to take effect on October 26th, 2019. On that score, an Anangu elder may have offered the most pertinent advice of all: "That's a really important sacred thing that you are climbing...You shouldn't climb. It's not a real thing about this place. The real thing is listening to everything...But anyway, that's what we have to say. We are obliged by Tjukurpa to say...This is the right way...This is the proper way: no climbing."

Online Resources

Other books about ancient history by Charles River Editors

Other books about Uluru on Amazon

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